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An Apocalyptic Manifesto

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An Apocalyptic Manifesto

Abstract

A Terminal Case? At the start of the 21st century, landscape architecture is a troubled profession, more distinguished by what it lacks than the qualities that it actually possesses. It has no historiography, no formal theory, no definition, direction, or focus. A vast schism currently exists between its academics and professional practitioners. In universities across the nation, researchers poach methodologies from other, more vibrant disciplines. Meanwhile, in professional offices, designers yoked to the bottom line crank out pedestrian design.

We believe these problems are pervasive and chronic. They indicate that landscape architecture is not just troubled, but sick. The condition of the patient is critical, requiring immediate attention.

Disciplines

Cultural Resource Management and Policy Analysis | Historic Preservation and Conservation | Landscape Architecture | Urban, Community and Regional Planning

Comments

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Landscape Architecture: An Apocalyptic Manifesto¹

¹ Rem Koolhaas has said “The fatal weakness of manifestos is their inherent lack of evidence.” (*Delirious New York*, 9). The authors agree with this statement. However, since landscape architecture is generally lacking in manifestos, we thought that maybe it was time for one.



I. A Terminal Case?

At the start of the 21st century, landscape architecture is a troubled profession, more distinguished by what it lacks than the qualities that it actually possesses. It has no historiography, no formal theory, no definition, direction, or focus. A vast schism currently exists between its academics and professional practitioners. In universities across the nation, researchers poach methodologies from other, more vibrant disciplines. Meanwhile, in professional offices, designers yoked to the bottom line crank out pedestrian design.

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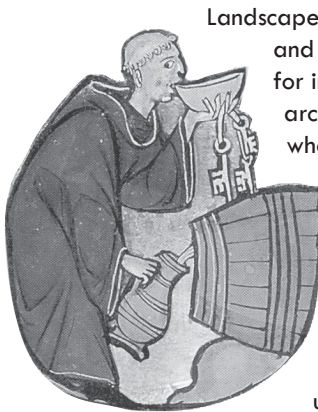
II. A Widening Gyre: Six Symptoms

Proof of landscape architecture's decline can be found in the following six symptoms:²

1) Landscape architecture has lost its roots in intellectual thought, culture, and literature.

Landscape architecture hardly resembles its former incarnations. This loss of identity has occurred mainly because of its loss of vital connections to other fields. Historically landscape architecture maintained integral and dynamic relationships to a variety of pursuits, from painting to sewerage. These relationships were not static or one-way streets; rather, they included an exchange of information that allowed the fields to dynamically play off each other, to evolve and expand. In 18th century England, for example, landscape architecture was, in concert with painting and poetry, one of the three graces, which together influenced broader artistic ideas. In the 19th century, landscape architecture was tied to literary ideas and transcendentalism; practitioners like Olmsted and Cleveland worked alongside Emerson, Longfellow, and Thoreau, extrapolating literature and philosophy into built form.

Landscape architecture today has no such reciprocal connections to current music, literature, or even popular culture. Unlike 18th century practitioners in the Kit Kat Club, whose ideas were central to artistic discussion, landscape architects today are relegated to the sidelines. Even professional connections to art and architecture are weak:



Landscape architects may imitate the land artists of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, but these artists do not look to landscape architecture for inspiration. Similarly, architects still largely view landscape architects as mere helpmates, to be ignored and abandoned when the economy is tight.

The relationship of landscape architecture to its allied professions is today parasitic rather than mutualistic: it takes more than it gives. Landscape architecture has replaced original and inventive thought with shameless, superficial borrowing from other, seemingly “cooler” and more “cutting edge” disciplines, often without really understanding what it borrows. Landscape architecture today no longer creates new ideas; it simply interprets those of other disciplines in the media of turf and trees, earth and concrete pavers.³

² The number six is not particularly magical. There are probably more, but we think this is a sufficient number to at least begin with.

³ Landscape architecture's lack of “phantasy” and original lines of developments (*Entwicklungslinien*) has been decried by Nicole Uhrig “Landscape en vogue,” 8; see also Stefanie Krebs “The Readability of Landscape Architecture” and James Corner “Representation and Landscape,” 255.

2) Landscape architecture no longer has connections to power and politics that historically defined its periods of greatest production, innovation, and prestige.

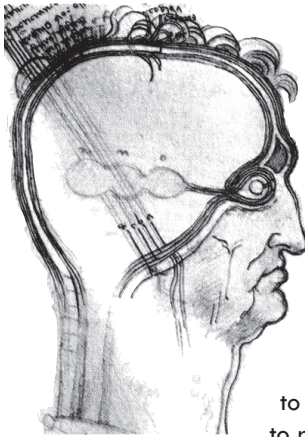
Historically, periods of professional visibility and strength have also been characterized by strong connections to political regimes or to sources of power, money, and influence. Andre Le Notre designed for the powerful, if corrupt, Sun Kings just as Alphand and Hausmann created public open spaces under the dictatorship of Napoleon III. The English Landscape Gardening School and Brown, Repton, Price and Knight were supported by the political power of wealthy landowners; Gilmore Clarke and Horace Albright linked their aspirations to the careers and public policies of Harold Ickes, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Robert Moses. In contrast, landscape architects today hide from politics and refuse to engage openly in the broader world of public policy.

Nor does the profession register on the radar screens of the powerful. In 1804, Thomas Jefferson, then president of the United States, was well versed in landscape gardening, and clearly, based on his 1782 land survey act, understood the importance of land and landscape on the future development of the United States. In 2004, however, does George Bush know what landscape architecture is and understand its potential value? Or, more to the point, perhaps, does Bill Gates? Who, besides landscape architects, really cares about landscape architecture?

⁴ As proof, we cite the hilarity induced by imagining landscape architectural connections to Eminem, Britney Spears, Steven King, Steven Spielberg, Julia Roberts, John Williams, or any commonly known or commercial artist in any but our immediately allied fields of art and architecture. Or, imagine any current, well-known landscape architect (Martha Schwartz or Laurie Olin, perhaps?) having the desire, connections, and wherewithal to host a prime-time TV show, as Ian McHarg did in 1969.

3) Landscape architecture has not replaced the loss of intellectual roots and political leverage with any new or important context or support.

In particular, landscape architecture is not tied into popular culture—the new religion—in any meaningful way.⁴ Landscape architecture has ignored the power inherent in popular culture and popular ideas.



Although the cultural production of private landscapes—once a mainstay of the profession—is now a democratized, widely popular art, landscape architects have abdicated this responsibility.⁵ Instead of participating in the process and encouraging an appreciation of design on a private scale that might lead to support for design on a public scale, landscape architects have allowed others—Martha Stewart, cable TV—to promote gardening as a consumer activity. This has led to the proliferation of the common residential landscape vocabulary—Keystone® retaining wall blocks, Interlock® pavers, and Haddonstone® planters—in the public landscape. Such professional lethargy is in marked contrast to Garrett Eckbo and Larry Halprin's use of *Sunset* magazine to popularize their work and then leverage this popularity into more important, more durable, and more visible public work.

As a result, today “landscape architecture” is both too popular and not popular enough. On the one hand, it is too familiar, too seemingly simple: to build a house is complicated, but everyman can plant a tree and mow a lawn. On the other hand, when complexity is introduced, John Q. Public perceives “landscape architecture” as irrelevant to his everyday concerns (“What does landscape systems theory have to do with my backyard?”).

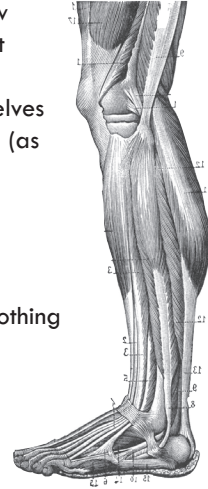
⁵ This is part of a continuing pattern. For example: landscape architects, pioneers of modern parkways in the 1930s, relinquished road design to engineers in the 1950s, relegating themselves to highway planting design. In a similar way, urban planning has largely become the domain of architects, transportation engineers and developers.

4) Landscape architecture, as currently practiced, is a deeply conservative activity.

Landscape architecture today is overly concerned with conservation. By this we do not only mean that it seeks to conserve physical, natural, and cultural resources, but that it also seeks to conserve economic, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual resources. Landscapes today are constructed to preclude consequences: to avoid controversy, to prevent cost overruns, to avert liability. The resulting landscapes of practice are uniform, built to CLARB standards of imagination.

In other words, the fearful field of landscape architecture takes few risks and resists change. But as Dr. Phil says, so long as you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got. In 1954, a different Phil put it another way: he said that designers limit themselves by leaning on standard practices. Fifty years later, these “crutches” (as he called them) still seem relevant to landscape architecture:

- the crutch of history (doing what's been done before);
- the crutch of the pretty drawing (so, today's is digital);
- the crutch of utility/usefulness (landscape architecture is nothing if not a useful profession);
- the crutch of comfort (both the designer's and the client's)
- the crutch of cheapness (no comment); and
- the crutch of structure (if there's order, it's ok).⁶



As long as the field is supported by these crutches, we question landscape architecture's ability to reinvent itself in the face of social and environmental change.

⁶ Philip Johnson, “The Seven Crutches of Modern Architecture,” excerpted in Charles Jencks and Karl Kropf, *Theories and Manifestoes of Contemporary Architecture*, 208-210. We do find it a little ironic that even our critique of landscape architecture employs an architect's help.

5) Landscape architecture today has no central or core defining values.

This lamentable situation is new. Historically, periods of professional dynamism and strength in landscape architecture are correlated with strong social agendas. In the early 1800s, the profession's gestation period, landscape architecture existed for a particularly compelling reason: the amelioration of social conditions caused by industrialization.⁷ It is no coincidence that landscape architecture gained prominence through the success of the Olmsteds in the late 19th and early 20th century in the United States, where a democratic political system, combined with a huge influx of immigrants, accelerated social reform in the face of modernization.

Such professional strength, through a connection to social reform, also characterized the 1930s, when landscape architects created new typologies such as parkways and residential subdivisions, while implementing the quasi-socialist vision of the Roosevelt administration. The 1950s and 1960s were another period of professional vigor, fueled by the social ideals of Modern architecture as transformed and translated into landscape by the likes of Garret Eckbo, James Rose, Hideo Sasaki, M. Paul Friedberg and Larry Halprin.

In contrast, landscape architecture today lacks a compelling and unifying social agenda. Landscape architecture is scattered among ever-increasing and increasingly disparate types of practice, ranging from garden design to GIS applications. But these practice types define activities, and activities do not provide a professional *raison d'être*. As a result, no one, not even landscape architects, knows what landscape architecture really is.⁸

⁷ See any general landscape history text such as Norman Newton, *Design on the Land*; Philip Preghill and Nancy Volkman, *Landscapes in History*; or George Chadwick, *The Park and the Town*.

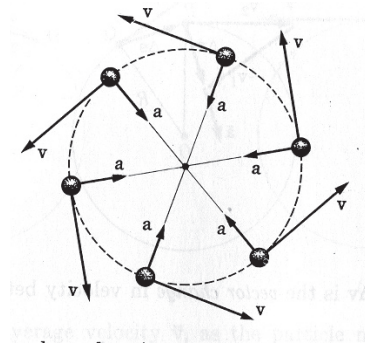
⁸ Sure, landscape architecture is loosely united by some vague environmental concerns. Yet defining such "environmentalism" is difficult, when some landscape architects support traditional real estate development while others promote "sustainable growth." Ironically, even among the latter, there is little consensus on what sustainability is or means. Of course, such professional single-mindedness is likely irrelevant. Within the past 100 years, landscape architects have seen—and even aided—the rise of other professions more nimble and effective at advancing environmental and social change: Consider the astounding effects environmental advocacy and law has had in protecting the United States' environment—its public lands, its clean air and clean water—since Earth Day. What comparable achievements has landscape architecture produced since then?

6) If landscape architecture cannot define a current direction, neither can it cope with its status as an undefined and undefinable profession.

In 1981 Stephen Krog's article "Is it Art?"⁹ unleashed a brief firestorm of vitriolic debate on the nature of landscape architecture. Is landscape architecture art? Is it "not art?" Is it applied art or is it science? Is it art + science? Is it...Well, what exactly IS it? The debate has intermittently continued over the past twenty-odd years, begging the question of whether the profession could actually be all of them simultaneously.

Considering that none of the allied professions of art, architecture, and engineering seem to have such existential angst,¹⁰ the major result of such debate seems to be the revelation that landscape architecture is hamstrung by its own ambiguous nature. Even worse, anything landscape architecture does—whether it's site engineering, site ecology, environmental art, site design, planting plans, sustainable design, cultural criticism—there is another field that can do it, and do it better.

This conundrum has led to two opposing forces acting on the field: The first is an outward/centrifugal pull, expanding the field to encompass all areas, reducing, eliminating and blurring disciplinary boundaries; the second is an inward/centripetal force which seeks to defend these boundaries and hoard a professional monopoly.¹¹ Together, these forces ensure the field's lack of directional momentum.



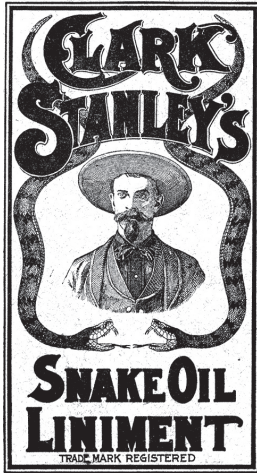
⁹ Steven R. Krog, "Is it Art?," 372-376

¹⁰ For example, it's hard to imagine engineers regularly asking themselves, "What IS engineering?"

¹¹ This is also related to the associated "Are landscape architects specialists or generalists" debate, another existential crisis well outlined in Patrick Miller, "A Profession in Peril?" This article also discusses the related conflict between practice and the academy.

III. Doctoring Landscape Architecture: Five Miracle Cures?

If there is consensus that landscape architecture is an ailing profession, then there has also been no shortage of therapies proposed to have magical healing properties.



Well-meaning members of the profession regularly propose panaceas for the aforementioned symptoms, in the exciting guise of “redefining the profession.” Such cures range from reforming education¹² to “designing with nature” to “expanding the field” to “recovering landscape” to “(de)forming, in(form)ing, and re(forming) landscape.”¹³

Yet despite their catchy slogans, these therapies have done little to heal the patient. We wonder, just how effective are these proposed cures for landscape architecture? Are they the professional equivalent of patent medicines or stem cell research?

It seems to us that it's time to more closely examine the many proposals to reinvigorate landscape architecture. In the following section, we dissect five of the most blatantly

optimistic and most frequently presented cures, to determine what, if any, promise they hold for reviving the patient.

¹² The authors admit their duplicity with this particular panacea, in light of the fact that we participate in the education of hapless youth as cannon fodder for the profession.

¹³ See Elizabeth Meyer, “The Expanded Field of Landscape Architecture;” James Corner, “Recovering Landscape as a Critical Cultural Practice;” and Peter Jacobs “De In{form}ing Landscape Re.” For other profession-reinvigorating proposals, one might also examine the following books: Bernard Lassus, *The Landscape Approach*; Kristina Hill and Bart Johnson, *Ecology and Design: Frameworks for Learning*, or James Corner, *Recovering Landscape*. This list is by no means comprehensive: There are many others.

1) The development of a critical discourse will re-energize landscape architecture's moribund nature.

This remedy is often trotted out and a “new” critical spirit is launched on a depressingly regular schedule.¹⁴ But the resulting provocative articles have a half-life of about one month, or the time it takes for a letter to the editor of *Landscape Architecture* magazine to be processed and forgotten. Critics may be writing, but no one's listening.¹⁵

Critical dialogue isn't a solution to landscape architecture's problems in part because the field has never sustained a critical dialogue. Landscape architecture has never had a major critical voice, preferring commentators or observers like Grady Clay, J.B. Jackson, and John Dixon Hunt over “real” architectural critics like Ada Louise Huxtable, Herbert Muschamp, and Robert Campbell. Landscape architecture today is distinctly anti-controversy, a sad, if logical, outcome of the field's polite, upperclass, gentlemanly upbringing. As a result the field doesn't know how to critically evaluate work, or what to do with criticism when it gets it.



Moreover, for discourse to work, someone has to care and the fact of the matter is, most people don't. Much of the profession is simply not interested in critical discourse and dialogue, preferring instead to go about the daily “business” of landscape architecture. At the same time, critical discourse requires dialogue and dialogue between the field's defining, polarized extremes—architectural theory wannabes versus “landscapers”—is really not possible. An intelligent middle-ground seems unattainable: In the words of William Butler Yeats, “[t]he best lack all convictions, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity.”

¹⁴ Such criticism “start-ups” include, but are by no means limited to, the aforementioned Stephen Krog article, plus his “Creative Risk Taking;” the series of topical counterpoint “debates” by Roger Wells and Ignacio Bunster-Ossa which appeared in *Landscape Architecture* from June 1997 to December 1998; and the poorly circulated annual *Critiques of Built Work*, published by the Department of Landscape Architecture at Louisiana State University. We assume this manifesto will soon be relegated to this category as well.

¹⁵ As illustrated by the premature demise of *Landscape Forum* in 2002 after only 14 issues.

2) If landscape architecture could learn to present its contributions to human welfare in a more convincing manner, then it would be understood and embraced by all.

This remedy proposes that landscape architecture is merely a misunderstood profession, unknown to the public at large, and that its problems will be solved by better—and more—communication with the public. A corollary to this argument is that the name of the profession should be changed, maybe to “land architect” or “land planner,” because the term “landscape” is too vague, too picturesque, too antique, and too confusing for the public to understand.

However, landscape architecture’s misery is not simply the result of a public relations failure or a “branding” deficiency. The inability of the profession to convey its value to the public is not so much a function of poor communication as it is a result of the profession’s discomfort with its ambiguous nature. Until landscape architecture knows what it is, no one else will, either.

3) The formulation of a body of theory will unify the disparate activities of landscape architecture and provide a direction for the field.

In light of

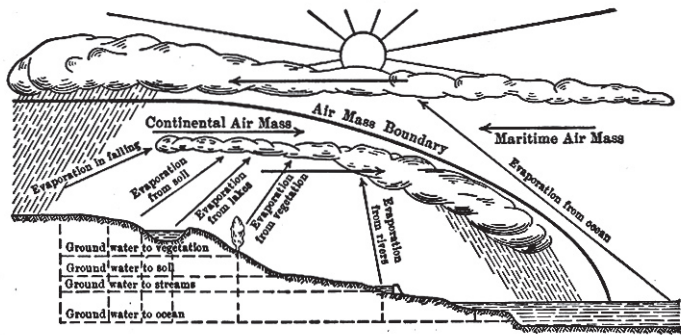
literary theory, architectural theory, the theory of relativity, evolutionary theory, small particle theory, chaos theory, modernist, post-modernist and poststructuralist theory, critical theory, Marxist and post-Marxist theory,

the lack of *landscape architectural* theory would appear to be a problem, at least to theoretical thinkers. But is the development of landscape architecture theory a viable solution to the waning nature of the profession?

Theory is an intellectual practice and, as a field emerging from the earth, landscape architecture has always had a distinctly anti-intellectual streak. After all, the key constructs of the field are very simple: Water runs down hill. Plants need light and sun to grow. The angle of repose of dirt is 3:1. Could it be that landscape architectural theory is simply the curtain hiding Dorothy from the Wizard?

Theory will please academics, but will do little to bridge the growing gulf between academics and practice, which ultimately surrounds this anti-intellectual aspect of landscape

architecture, an aspect which grows stronger as a global market and service economy are brought to bear on the profession.



The question thus remains, what is landscape architectural theory? Much of what's being proposed as theory is appropriated from other fields—probably necessary given that landscape architecture evolved from a diverse set of pre-existing disciplines. As a result, the profession's multiple areas of activity are now spawning multiple theories, theories the big thinkers of the profession would like to parlay into a unifying theory of design. But is this really possible? Seeing landscape architecture as a unifying discipline, an incarnation of cross-, inter-, and transdisciplinarity, might be heartwarming, but seems a little presumptuous given the profession's current insularity.

4) Ecology and sustainable design will breathe new life into landscape architecture, which will then become the bastion of applied ecology and the protector of the earth.



Though often presented as a new and revolutionary concept, ecology was not absent at the roots of the profession, as seen in the work of designers as diverse as Repton, Olmsted, and Jensen. Their picturesque/pastoral landscape ideal—a highly diverse landscape, a dense mosaic of different habitats, well-connected and rich in ecotones—is the image that underlies, implicitly or explicitly, most “ecological” designs to this day.¹⁶

By the mid-20th century, McHarg’s rational and analytical “ecological determinism” was initially used in service of a euphoric Modernist desire to improve the world. But as decision-making moved from expert-driven to discursive, landscape architecture’s 19th century perception (and self perception) of being based largely on aesthetic concerns (of taste rather than necessity) soon threatened its existence in a value-pluralistic (and occasionally even democratic) discourse. Thus ecology as an undisputable, scientific, and fact-based foundation¹⁷ became the last straw of a field trying to save itself, moving landscape interventions from the disputable to the factual. With nature and ecology as sacrosanct values, landscape architecture also thereby excused itself from a larger political and cultural discourse, a comfortable, if limiting position the profession has embraced for the past 30 years.

Yet somehow, a large part of the profession has missed out on the subtle difference between descriptive science and the normative use of its findings. Island biogeography and population ecology, habitat connectivity, patch dynamics, and more recently the general obsession with “landscape process” are now the pavers of good intention on the road to “better” landscapes. Today, just framing a natural process as part of a design can still excuse landscape architects from making potentially contestable decisions.

The question of whether ecology is just a “green veneer” for the profession or whether landscape architecture becomes “ecological design” is mostly semantics. The larger issue: Landscape architecture is inextricably caught in the nature-culture/art-science dialectic. Although all of the above should obviously be integrated in design, and while the profession argues that it has successfully done so, there is still little evidence, beyond a showcase project or exemplary individual, that this is true. Rather, by trying to be both art and science/nature and culture, the profession does a good job at neither.

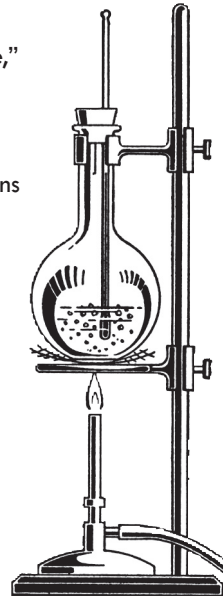
¹⁶ Sadly, this type of landscape was the direct outcome of a particular economic, social, cultural, ecological and physical context and reality. Since no one (or very few) today would like to bear this reality, a re-creation of this landscape ideal seems out of place and out of date. It is symptomatic, that landscape architecture and other disciplines so far have failed to develop landscapes that express a contemporary set of conditions and values.

5) Landscape architecture is uniquely situated to be an experimental field less bound by formal and technical constraints, and should be reinvented as such.

This argument, an admittedly more European take on the subject of landscape architecture's problems, states that landscape design could be used as an indicator of current conditions, as well as an experimental stage for dealing with those conditions. In other words, because "landscape" is not just a cultural construct, but also a potential "agent of change," landscape architecture is attributed with the power, or at least the possibility, to design that agency.¹⁸

In the light of landscape architecture's disconnect from concentrations of economic and political power, this would seem a rather grandiloquent statement. Yet despite the field's obvious lack of power and influence to implement its own creations, and despite its infusion with (the Reader's Digest version of) systems theory, the hope of a "new" landscape architecture persists, with incrementalism, open-endedness, and experimentation flaunted as the approaches *du jour*.

In fact, landscape architecture *used to be* an experimental field, aligning itself with and participating in the big cultural projects of enlightenment and modernism. Today, however, participation in a culture determined by "multivalent postmodern pluralism" is necessary to be "experimental," and this, unfortunately, does not sit well with landscape architecture's conservative base values, its lack of risk-taking and anti-controversial attitudes. Hence, experimentation cannot occur; the "landscape experiment"¹⁹ is therefore undertaken by other disciplines.²⁰



¹⁷ Ecology has had its own struggle to be accepted as a "real science;" see Ludwig Trepl, *Geschichte der Oekologie (History of Ecology)*.

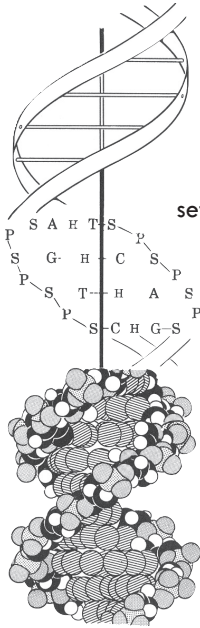
¹⁸ This argument is more fully described in James Corner, "Recovering Landscape as a Critical Cultural Practice;" Thorbjörn Andersson, "Open design fields in contemporary landscape," and in Richard Weller, "Between Hermeneutics and datascares," 11-13.

¹⁹ Furthermore, the concept of experiment is not well defined in landscape architecture. It seems quite different from that of other, scientific disciplines, in which a guided inquiry involves operational definitions, testing hypotheses, control groups, and measureable results. This is not just a landscape architectural problem, however, as Thomas Fisher points out in "The Value and Values of Architecture," (33-37) where he describes architecture's inability to quantify, measure and assess values, though he does not express this explicitly as experimentation.

²⁰ See projects by MYRDV, Raoul van Bunschoten and CHORA, and West 8 (okay, so Adriaan Geuze is a landscape architect, but this is a multi-disciplinary firm), UN studio, for work that might be considered "experimental."

IV. Does the patient have the will to live?

It is also possible that no amount of medical heroics will save the ailing patient. What if, for instance, the failure of landscape architecture is contained in its genetics?



The existence of landscape architecture as a concept, as coined by J.C. Loudon, dates to only 1840, and its use as a professional title to 1862, when Olmsted and Vaux described themselves as landscape architects.²¹ The field coalesced from a diverse set of related pursuits—among them agriculture, building, architecture, gardening, and painting/representation—in response to a particular set of political and cultural conditions, including increasing populations, urban growth, the rise of individualism, and industrialization, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. These conditions are generally known as modernization, and landscape architecture did not, in the form in which it existed in 1850, exist prior to these modern conditions.

However, the forces that held a disparate set of activities together as the discipline of landscape architecture are no longer functioning. Modern conditions have given way to a set of new, post-modern social and political conditions, including multiculturalism and globalization. Unfortunately, landscape architecture is demonstrating an inability to accommodate these basic ideas of postmodernism, especially the dissolution of the nature-culture dichotomy.

The loss of landscape architecture's conditioning forces has set the profession adrift in "the liminal space between signifier and signified, mind and matter, intellect and body."

²² If, as Roland Barthes said, the postmodern world can be seen as "a textual field — it writes us, and we write it"²³ that world seems to be largely devoid of landscape architects as either readers or authors.

²¹ John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections*, 1, 3.

²² James Corner, "Ecology and landscape as agents of creativity," 97. Ok, so we don't know what this really means, either. But it sure sounds impressive, doesn't it?

²³ Roland Barthes, as quoted in Richard Weller, "Between Hermeneutics and Datascares," 6.

V. Is it Dead?

We suspect that landscape architecture's critical condition indicates that the profession is on its deathbed. But should we continue to administer care? Should we really desire to resuscitate the patient? Might landscape architecture not be a field whose time has come and has now passed? Are landscape architects thus like other defunct 19th century professionals such as farriers, wheelwrights, chimney sweeps, bloodletters? Has landscape architecture now become a practice of nostalgia?

What if landscape architecture disintegrated back into a set of related disciplines much as existed prior to its creation? Is it time, we wonder, to just pull the plug and put landscape architecture out of its misery?

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